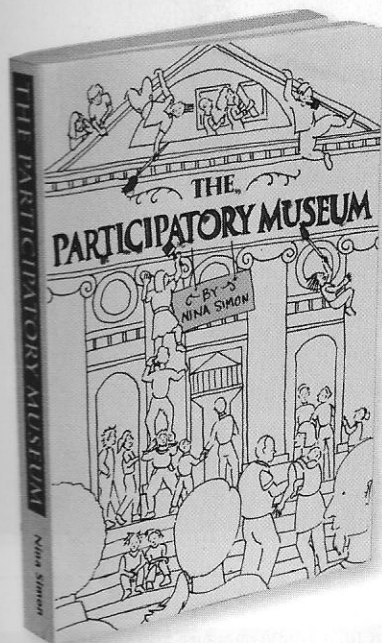


What Would the Internet Do?

By Sarah Jesse



The Participatory Museum. By Nina Simon. Santa Cruz, Calif.: Museum 2.0, 2010. 371 pp., softcover, \$25.

It might be useful to channel Albert Einstein while reading Nina Simon's book *The Participatory Museum*. Einstein's reminder that "we can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them" might make some of the more radical ideas explored in Simon's book easier to accept. Confronting the challenge of making museums matter in an era of declining attendance, Simon proposes that cultural institutions operate more like the Internet. While her premise is undisputedly creative, exciting and futuristic, Simon's inclusion of several extreme case studies may prompt readers to dismiss the more egregious aspects of the participatory museum model.

The Participatory Museum stands out from other writing in the field with its wholly accessible language, inclusion of unusual sources of inspiration and, as a result, truly inventive ideas for the 21st-century museum. Simon's goal for the participatory museum is to change the dynamic of the visitor from passive consumer to cultural participant, similar to the way YouTube, Facebook, Flickr and Wikipedia have transformed our expectations for accessibility, community and interactivity. With sites such as these, we demand access to a wide pool of information along with the ability to customize, critique and share it at will. Simon looks to the dynamics—not necessarily the technology—of these online platforms, as well as best practices from bars, bookstores and casinos, to model a new kind of thinking required to move museums into the future and increase their relevance in a

changing world.

Bringing together numerous examples from institutions around the globe, Simon highlights museums that have successfully implemented the participatory museum model. She describes one imaginative exhibit, "Internet Arm Wrestling," installed in six U.S. science centers. To illuminate the concept of haptic technology (using the sense of touch), a device allows strangers to arm wrestle without making physical contact. Opponents ply their strength against a mechanical arm that sends real-time information over the Internet to a matching kiosk that could be thousands of miles away or around the corner. Participants see their competitors through a webcam, allowing for good-natured competitive tactics. This smart exhibit takes the difficult concept of telehaptics and makes it immediately graspable through a fun, social experience.

The Walters Art Museum in Baltimore also implemented an effective program aligned with Simon's approach without requiring expensive technology. Visitors selected a character from Greek mythology that most resembled their personalities. By wearing profile tags throughout the exhibition, participants customized their experience, shared something unique about their personalities and prompted conversation. The exhibition came alive for these participants in a way that the passive viewer could not experience.

Both of these activities, like many outlined in the book, are objectively sound ways to engage audiences. However, while Simon's greatest contribution is that she challenges the field to think differently,

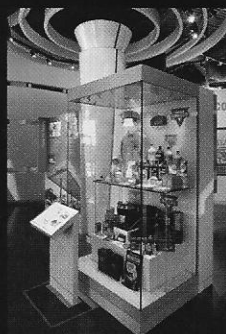
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it would be a mistake to dive into this approach without a full understanding of its consequences. Like all good models, the participatory museum strategy exists to be deconstructed. Unfortunately, Simon doesn't do that work for the reader. Instead, she promotes a range of initiatives, including examples the reader may find to be misguided. Simon hails several efforts that inadvertently demonstrate the drawbacks encountered when museums give the public a high degree of agency. Specifically, the idea of the "citizen curator" highlights the complexities involved in enlisting the public to perform tasks historically reserved for professionals.

For example, the Glasgow Open Museum lends objects from its collection to community groups so they can develop their own exhibitions. The resulting displays take place in hospitals, community centers and at the museum. While this initiative solves problems museums face regarding accessibility, it creates new complications. It ultimately undermines the rigor of the curatorial process and robs visitors of the high-quality product they expect from museums—a cohesive, thoughtful, well-researched presentation. While Simon acknowledges the radical departure from standard museum practice, she does not delve into whether the larger repercussions make a project like this worthwhile.

Another example is the Brooklyn Museum's 2008 initiative "Click! A Crowd-Curated Exhibition." The project consisted of an online and in-gallery exhibition of amateur photographs selected by public vote. The curators discussed the exhibition's merit in terms of data visualization, not aesthetics, which made for a less-than-desirable experience for the photographers. While the experimental spirit of the project is admirable, it raises issues like those of the Glasgow Open Museum. Is there a way to design a participatory

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experience without compromising the museum's expertise and the quality of the visitor experience? Authority doesn't always mean oppression.

The book lacks a thorough discussion about the stakes for museums that venture deep into participatory territory and potentially alter their status from professional to peer. Critical to consider is whether visitors actually want that shift. After all, most people seek a doctor for serious medical advice as opposed to self-diagnosing or consulting a friend. Simon points out that, surprisingly, only .2 percent of Flickr visitors post photographs, and even fewer create videos for YouTube. Yet millions of people daily interact on these sites by looking, discussing and sharing. This is a useful reminder that interactivity can be defined in different ways, and only a small percentage of people desire the more intensive end of the participatory spectrum. Not everyone wants to be a curator. Most choose to leave that work to the experts.

Simon's argument would have been strengthened had she recognized that a line exists between a quality participatory experience for both museum and visitor versus one that may not be worth the sacrifices made on both sides. All museums want to be essential, relevant and responsive—but at what expense? Simon believes the appeal of participatory environments is specific to project, validating her inclusion of a multitude of examples, most of them laudable, some detrimental. The absence of critical evaluation in describing the imprudent efforts doesn't allow for dialogue on the hazards of adopting the extreme aspects of the model. But then again, like those who doubted Einstein, Simon's critics could very well be eating crow years from now when crowd-curated exhibitions and community galleries become standard museum practice. ●

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